

Realities, *Realia*, and Realism: An Introduction to the Symposium

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When the 2002 symposium was first proposed by Angeliki Laiou and myself under the title “Realities in the Arts of the Medieval Mediterranean, 800–1500,” some doubt was expressed as to the meaning of the first word—an aporia that in itself points to the rarity with which the art of this region and period is associated with the concept of reality. Surely we did not mean to study its “realism,” that is, the manner and extent to which artists replicated the appearance of the sensible world or of the things with which men and women had filled it: its costumes, weapons, furniture, the “built environment,” and so on. No, we were not referring to the *naturalia, realia*,¹ or even the *artificia* of this time and space, but rather to the historical processes within which artistic creations occurred and which, in one way or another, they represented. “Realities” in our view referred to larger patterns, much in the sense intended by the authors of the series of studies published under the title *Realités byzantines*.²

To our mind, then, the question was the extent to which representations could be seen to exemplify, express, or even to have furthered, developments recognized by cultural, social, and economic historians. Insights of this sort would have a twofold, mutual benefit. On the one hand, those who were not art historians could avail themselves of bodies of evidence that they had not considered earlier; on the other, art historians could enrich their approach by viewing objects not only in contexts of commission and production but of modes of behavior, as suggested, for example, by the treasure trove that is the general index of the *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents*.³ This, of course, includes *realia* but, more important, provides models for the study of their reception and repeated use.

Beside substantive interaction between disciplines, there could also be benefits at a theoretical, that is, epistemological level. The linear sequences of stylistic and iconographical evolution that in some art historical accounts seem to possess a life of their own, independent of the developmental stages recognized by, say, historians of technology or liturgy, could be tested against findings in these fields. Conversely, the tendency among

¹ On which see most recently M. G. Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images. Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography (11th–15th Centuries)* (Leiden, 2003).

² E.g., *Hommes et richesses dans l’Empire byzantin*, vol. 2, *VIIIe–XVe siècle*, ed. V. Kravari, J. Lefort, and C. Morisson (Paris, 1991).

³ Ed. J. Thomas and A. C. Hero, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C., 2000).

some historians of diplomacy, warfare, or religious cult to take images as literal, rather than conventional, depictions of the events with which they are concerned could be adjudicated in the light of what we know about the practices of medieval artists.

Historians of texts and images alike have long since understood that neither of these systems of representation presents directly trustworthy data. Both require recognition of layers of “intervention” between us and “reality”—first, at the moment of their creation and, second, at the level of our interpretation of the material at hand. All would agree that we act on the basis of imperfect knowledge and imperfect understanding. But it is evident that the latter is not merely a function of the former: even were our knowledge to be complete, scholars will always discover the need to revisit it. The work of both these sorts of historians—displayed in the present volume by David Jacoby, who refines our awareness of supply and demand in the silk business, and Leslie Brubaker, who suggests the complexities involved in the interpretation even of refined data—is grist to our mill. It is hardly necessary to point out that while our awareness is no doubt enlarged by the acquisition of more information, such acquisition does not in itself guarantee that our understanding will thereby be enhanced. But this difficulty—the inherent paradox of positivism—does not relieve us of the obligation to collect and analyze as much as possible of the data reported in the texts, a task here undertaken by Peter Schreiner with respect to the exchange of diplomatic gifts between Byzantium and the early medieval West. He notes the paucity of references to such presents in the Greek, as against the Latin, texts which, however ample, are bedeviled by the problem of inventions of fictitious gifts.⁴ I would parenthetically observe that stories of this sort have much to tell us, if not about the realities of exchange, then about the mentality of the alleged recipients and their attitudes toward the cultures represented by the fictitious donors.

Of course, texts of this order provide the raw material for a different if, in my view, no less interesting sort of history. How, then, to test—in principle, if not in terms of specifics—the pretensions to exchange offered in medieval documents? On occasion, and as implied above, simply the introduction of new documentation can sometimes serve to corroborate that which heretofore had existed only in the realm of wishful thinking, medieval or modern.⁵ But more often than not the written sources, addressed as they are to larger events, and objectives other than the movements of mere *things*, are taciturn, if not entirely silent, about objects passing to and fro across the medieval Mediterranean. In the face of such *lacunae*, the historian can turn to material that remains underexploited, as in the case of the ceramics with which Véronique François is concerned. Using this and other types of evidence one can construct larger patterns, the course pursued by Chris Wickham in the first of the articles published here. However broad its temporal and geographical scope, it is grounded in the fabric of archaeology and especially in the awareness of differences between and within regions. A just (and surely overdue) acknowledgment of the huge diversity that characterizes the production of Crusader icons and manuscripts is likewise

⁴ The same problem besets surviving Arab gift lists which, nonetheless, are larger in number and richer in detail than either their Latin or Greek equivalents. On these, see A. Cutler, “Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies,” *DOP* 55 (2001): 247–78.

⁵ Some claims made in both medieval sources and the scholarship devoted to them are scrutinized in A. Cutler, “Imagination and Documentation: Eagle Silks in Byzantium, the Latin West, and ‘Abbāsid Baghdad,’ *BZ* 96 (2003): 69–74.

the contribution of Jaroslav Folda who, in an extended meditation on the figures of the Magi in a famous Nativity icon at Mount Sinai, finds realism at work in their portrayals and seeks to place the icon within the frame of historical events of the year 1260. In such cases what we now call works of art could offer an invaluable complement to the chroniclers who were rarely concerned with small, material things. Objects, in other words, can flesh out the written record: by emphasizing containers rather than their contents, Holger Klein's scrutiny of reliquaries at times confirms, and at other times qualifies, the accounts of relics that moved westward according to the texts assembled by Peter Schreiner. Indeed, close study of the material evidence, as in Jannic Durand's article on Gothic metalwork and jewelry and their Greek counterparts, can illuminate mechanisms of exchange scarcely discernible in the documents that we possess from the last period of Byzantium.

Given such indigence, we cannot afford to spurn even the scraps of information regarding east-west relations thrown to us by the literary sources, however legendary the events they describe may be. One such is a passage in the *Roman de Rou* whose author, the mysterious Wace, tells of Robert Guiscard not only organizing an expedition to install his surrogate on the Byzantine throne—a historical fact—but actually visiting Constantinople himself and meeting the emperor, presumably Michael VII Doukas.⁶ Received at court, Robert followed local custom by spreading his cloak on the floor and sitting on it since there were no chairs. When dismissed by the emperor he left his cloak on the floor, declining to put it on with the words “I do not carry my bench with me.” All of Robert’s retainers did likewise, behavior that so shamed the emperor, who, in the “spin” that Wace puts on it, was so impressed by the Normans’ noblesse⁷ that he ordered benches and seats to be installed in the palace. The incident is, of course, pure fiction—the nearest Robert got to Constantinople was Illyria, though he wed his daughter to Michael’s son Constantine—but deep inside it are some grains of material truth. Not only does the story jibe with the famous frontispiece in the Chrysostom manuscript in Paris of courtiers who stand as they attend the enthroned Michael;⁸ it also fits the picture that Nicolas Oikonomides drew at a symposium at Dumbarton Oaks some fifteen years ago of a Byzantium relatively devoid of furniture.⁹ If this was so, the medieval Greek world stood on the far side of a cultural divide, closer to the domain of the Arabs and bedouin than to that of western Europe.¹⁰ The presence or absence of *realia*, then, may not be entirely at odds with historical reality.

⁶ *Le Roman de Rou de Wace*, ed. A. J. Holden, 3 vols. (Paris, 1970–73), 1: lines 3067–86, 3115–20.

⁷ Or perhaps the generosity implicit in abandoning precious garments.

⁸ Bibl. Nationale, Coislin 79, fol. 2r: *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261*, exhib. cat., ed. H. C. Evans and W. D. Wixom (New York, 1997), no. 143. Michael’s likeness and the inscription of his name were altered ca. 1078 to represent his successor, Nikephoros Botaneiates. See C. L. Dumitrescu, “Quelques remarques en marge du Coislin. 79: Les trois eunuques,” *Byzantion* 57 (1987): 32–45.

⁹ “The Contents of the Byzantine House from the Eleventh to the Fifteenth Century,” *DOP* 44 (1990): 205–14.

¹⁰ See Y. Sadan, *Le mobilier du Proche-Orient médiéval* (Paris, 1976), 8, on the frontier between those who lived their indoor lives on or slightly above the floor and those who sat on chairs and used tables that had legs. The image of the throne as signifier of royalty may also be a telling instance of cultural exchange. Generally absent from early Islamic art, it appears as an attribute of the caliph in the apse at Qusayr ‘Amrā seemingly in response to some late antique or early Byzantine model. See the old but still valuable study by V. Strika, “La formazione dell’iconografia del Califfo nell’arte ommiade,” *Annali* [Instituto Universitario Orientale de Napoli], n.s. 14 (1964): 727–72, esp. 730–31 and pl. IV.

Both techniques and goods crossed this divide, even if the latter, especially when made of precious materials, have disappeared only to leave their trace in inherently more durable monuments. Northern Spain offers several examples of such transfers: among the buildings of Ramiro I (842–850), the so-called palace basilica displays roundels inspired by Middle Eastern, possibly Sasanian, silver plates, while the decoration of the doorjambs of the neighboring church of S. Miguel de Liño includes groups of figures divided by circus scenes ultimately derived from a consular diptych.¹¹ Yet we lack information about the overall historical texture that would allow us to track the filiations implicated in these cases: the luxury goods that provoked such borrowings pass below the radar, so to speak, of even the most recent studies addressed to the movement of commercially significant transactions.¹² Regarding the transmission of methods of production, we are even more in the dark since such realities did not interest the authors of our textual sources and, as in the case of silks, the “archaeology” involved points to similarities in manufacture but tells us nothing of the mechanisms that gave rise to these common techniques. Without an explanatory historical setting we have no more than the raw technical data. The well-known mid-twelfth-century enameled bowl in Innsbruck depicting the ascent of Alexander¹³ is often ascribed to an Artuqid workshop in Diyarbekir that worked for Muslim and Christian patrons alike, but whether this milieu was the source or the recipient of the craft of working in *Senkschmelz* on copper, shared with a reliquary in Berlin with the Deesis and saints and an icon of Theodore the dragonslayer in the Hermitage,¹⁴ remains unknown—if indeed independent invention of this difficult but economical means of production is to be ruled out.¹⁵

Factories that turned out objects for clients of different faiths had been a fact of life in the Mediterranean area at least as early as the sarcophagi produced in third-century Rome for Christians and “pagans.” Such shops pose special problems in that very often we have no more to go on than commonalities of carving technique. And when these are not observed, as is often the case, attributions to a particular milieu and/or period often rest precariously on readings of an object’s style—a method which, however expert the reader’s

¹¹ J. Fontaine, *L’art préroman hispanique*, vol. 1 (La Pierre-qui-Vire, 1973), 319, 322. On these churches see more recently A. Arbeiter and S. Noack-Haley, “The Kingdom of Asturias,” in *The Art of Medieval Spain, A.D. 500–1200*, exhib. cat., ed. J. D. Dodds (New York, 1993), 115–16. The westward route of the hypothetical ivory may have resembled that of the diptych of Apion now in Oviedo: J.-M. Fernández-Pajaros, “El díptico bizantino de la Catedral de Oviedo,” *Asturiensis Medievalia* 4 (1981): 9–59.

¹² O. R. Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain* (Cambridge, 1994), an important study for our purposes if the luxuries in question traveled, as is entirely possible in the case of Islamic silver, via the Umayyad emirate.

¹³ *Glory of Byzantium*, no. 281.

¹⁴ Berlin reliquary: O. von Falke, “Kupferzellenschmelz im Orient und in Byzanz,” *Monatshefte für Kunsthissenschaft* 11 (1909): 283–39, figs. 3, 4; Hermitage icon: *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia. Orthodox Art from the Sixth to the Twentieth Century*, exhib. cat., ed. Y. Piatnitsky, O. Baddeley, et al. (London–St. Petersburg, 2000), 89, no. B64. Copper offers a less satisfactory support than gold, which does not oxidize. It is also more problematical at the production stage since its coefficient of expansion differs from that of gold which is closer to that of glass, and thereby entails greater stress between the two materials as they cool after fusing. For a possible reason for the employment of copper, see A. Cutler, “The Industries of Art,” in *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, ed. A. E. Laiou et al., 3 vols. (Washington, D.C., 2001), 2: 577.

¹⁵ Byzantium has been proposed as the source of enameling techniques used in Fatimid Egypt and Syria by V. Gonzalez, “Pratique d’une technique d’art byzantin chez les Fatimides: L’émaillerie sur métal,” in *L’Égypte byzantine, son art et son histoire, Actes du colloque organisé à Paris le 28, 29 et 30 mai 1998*, ed. M. Barrucand (Paris, 1999), 197–217.

eye, is treated with suspicion by historians looking for a verifiable, or at least less “subjective,” approach. Such skepticism is understandable when, for instance, two rock crystal pyramid seals (Figs. 1, 2) now in a private collection in Munich are considered. These pieces, one depicting a holy rider labeled ΘΕ (retrograde, and presumably with ὁδῷος to be supplied) and the other, even though it lacks an inscription, unmistakably an image of the Annunciation, have been assigned to Constantinople in the twelfth–thirteenth centuries and the tenth–twelfth centuries respectively.¹⁶ An Islamicist, particularly one concerned with the sizable number of portable goods prepared by Muslim craftsmen for Christian clients, might well prefer to see these as products of Fātimid Cairo or Fustāt, where the commercial carving of rock crystal is documented by both eleventh-century texts and modern archaeology¹⁷ rather than middle Byzantine Constantinople where work in this medium and for such a purpose was minimal.¹⁸ Yet difficulties in the matter of localization are faint when compared to the problem of their chronology. A very similar seal, again an Annunciation carved in rock crystal, in the Staatliche Münzsammlung in Munich (Fig. 3), has been assigned to the fourth–sixth-century eastern Mediterranean.¹⁹ Each of the three pieces was incised using the same means—a drill or wheel attached to a bow lathe²⁰—and yielded all but identical results—summary, linear treatments of human or animal forms, garments, and sharp-planed features. Which, if either, of the two opinions concerning the date and place of manufacture of these objects is correct is, for our present purposes, not the point. Rather, as is true of a large number of supposedly “Byzantine” or “Islamic” silks, it is clear that in the case of these rock crystals our procedures are without cogent theoretical foundation.

If the obvious function of these stamps gives us some purchase on the realities of the world in which they were used, as objects they still lack that historical dimension necessary to our understanding. Absences of this sort are perhaps most acute when we are faced with visual evidence that presupposes a connection—in terms of craftsmen or at least the models to which directly or indirectly they had access—between Byzantium and other regions. Such transfers were the concern of many of the symposium’s speakers who demonstrated the interdependence of a work’s content and the context in which it came into being or was later employed. Their achievement throws into relief the problems that arise when we lack any documentary foundation even for major monuments. Such is the case with the five (out of an original six) monumental archangels painted on the choir walls of the Michael chapel of Frauenwörth on the Chiemsee in Bavaria. The Carolingian foundation of the Benedictine convent, the architectural history of its *Torhalle* (westwork), and its successive transformations are well understood,²¹ but forty years after their discovery controversy

¹⁶ *Byzanz, das Licht aus der Osten. Kult und Alltag im Byzantinischen Reich vom 4. bis 15. Jahrhunderts*, exhib. cat., ed. C. Stiegemann (Mainz, 2001), 236–37, nos. III.8, III.9. Unremarked in these catalogue entries is the absence of haloes or any designation of the figures’ saintly status. Such omissions, even from small objects, are not unknown but remain rare in Byzantine art.

¹⁷ See A. Contadini, *Fatimid Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London, 1998), 20–25.

¹⁸ Thus G. Vikan, “Seals, Cone or Pyramid,” in *ODB 3: 1858–59*: “Early specimens tend to be of stone (e.g., rock crystal) with uninscribed figures or animals, while those of the 10th C. or later are almost universally bronze.”

¹⁹ *Rom und Byzanz. Archäologische Kostbarkeiten aus Bayern*, exhib. cat., ed. L. Wamser and G. Zahlhaas (Munich, 1999), 238, no. 373. It is clumsily inscribed XAIP[E].

²⁰ See Contadini, *Fatimid Art*, 27.

²¹ And conveniently presented in H. Dannheimer, *Torhalle auf Frauenchiemsee*, 3d ed. (Munich, 1983).

still surrounds these paintings, and especially the two monumental figures on the north wall (Fig. 4). Herbert Schindler saw these as expressions of the Carolingian Renaissance about 800, Hans Sedlmayr dated them about fifty years later, and Otto Demus found their most convincing parallels in eleventh-century Ottonian art.²² As was perceived from the start of this body of scholarly investigation, a Constantinopolitan source is an all but inescapable aspect of their constitution, but especially when the surviving images are recognized as underpaintings rather than finished this is far more likely to resemble a mosaic like the hitherto unconsidered archangels in the apse of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Fig. 5) than the sixth-century ivory in the British Museum²³ proposed by Sedlmayr.

The problem here is more than a question of the “influence” that led to a particular work of art, for twenty years after the initial discovery of the wall paintings the Chiemsee yielded a bone plaque depicting the seated Hercules that was originally and indubitably part of Byzantine box revetment.²⁴ Yet we have no history of relations between this Bavarian site and the Byzantine capital. Was it, like the see of Toul on the Moselle, a haven for Greek monks?²⁵ Until such communications are established²⁶—a central ambition of this symposium—we remain in the dark about one of the prime realities of artistic diffusion in the Middle Ages.

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²² The debate is summarized in O. Demus and M. Hirmer, *Romanesque Mural Painting* (New York, 1970), 612, to which must be added the important report by M. Exner, “Denkmäler frühmittelalterlicher Wandmalerei in Bayern. Bestand, Ergebnisse, Aufgaben,” in *Wandmalerei des frühen Mittelalters. Bestand, Maltechnik, Konserverung* (Munich, 1998), 99–118, esp. 111–12.

²³ W. F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, 3d ed. (Mainz, 1976), no. 109.

²⁴ A. Cutler, *The Hand of the Master. Craftsmanship, Ivory, and Society in Byzantium (9th–11th Centuries)* (Princeton, 1994), 242 and fig. 247.

²⁵ On their presence and the liturgical arrangements made to accommodate them, see P. M. McNulty and B. Hamilton, “*Orientale lumen et magistra latinitas: Greek Influence on Western Monasticism (900–1100)*,” in *Le millénaire du Mont Athos, 963–1963: Études et mélanges*, 2 vols. (Venice, 1963), 1: 199, 214.

²⁶ As they are for other locales by M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy. Communications and Commerce A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001).

1 Seal stamp, rock crystal. St. Theodore (?). Munich, Collection Christian Schmidt (photo: Christian Schmidt)



2 Seal stamp, rock crystal. Annunciation. Munich, Collection Christian Schmidt (photo: Christian Schmidt)



3 Seal stamp, rock crystal. Annunciation. Munich, Staatliche Münzsammlung (photo: author)





4 Archangel. Wall painting, Frauenchiemsee, *Torhalle* (photo: author)



5 Archangel mosaic. Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (photo: Dumbarton Oaks)